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Making of a Witch

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A reformed member of the Wyrd speaks about the process of becoming a member of the group. She only knows about one isolated band, deep in the jungle, but she believes her story is not atypical. Find out more in our latest supplement to the Living Force campaign, which ties into the scenario "Hunting the Wyrd."

It was the summer of my twelfth year when the dark side began to tug at my heart. I remember the day with a clarity one usually experiences upon holding one's child for the first time, or watching as a loved one passes out of this life. Those moments -- instants of birth, and of death -- burn themselves into our memories. This day was both of those to me. It was birth and death, and it was pain that I only began to feel years later.

The rains were not long stopped. Leaves hung heavy with water, shuddering and dripping onto rich, leaf-shrouded firmament. Trees in this part of the jungle only rose to heights of twenty or thirty meters, but their branches were thick, their leaves large, and the light made its way to the path I walked. The scaly trunks smelled of mist and forgetfulness. Where rocks poked their heads through the leaves, between the blades of grass, patches of brilliant green moss had taken hold. The moss shimmered; it was wet and dense. It wanted to grow. I felt it so strongly that more than once I knelt beside the path and cleared some of the dirt from around the base of a rock. I scraped at the dirt with my fingers, digging in, feeling for the edges of the rock, following its gentle angle into the ground. I might clear a few centimeters, and it might be filled in by a passing kilassin before the day was out, but I found myself thinking that this was the way things needed to be. For growth, there had to be potential. I would provide the potential. I would kneel in the gray and scrape the tips of my fingers along a mossy stone. I would give it a chance. More rock, more moss. More moss, more luminous, moist green.

It is the last time I remember thinking about anything beautiful for many, many years.

The wonder of the jungles of Cularin is that no matter how far you walk, no matter how many times you might take the same path, there are always things that may surprise you. The jungle shifts. A tree falls, and we see the smaller tree that once hid behind it, wrapped in vines dotted with orange and purple flowers that can be mixed one way to make medicine, or another to make poison. A bush burns, and we see that it shrouded the entrance to a deep cave, filled with uncounted mysteries and beckoning the curious, the foolish, and the young.

On this day, I smelled the new before I saw it. The air carried on it a sharp staleness, the smell of old wood that has burned for a time, then been snuffed by the rain. The rains of that afternoon had been heavy, and not without lightning, but I remembered no strike nearby. Still, it would be something new. It would give me something to do, to avoid finishing my walk home, to avoid the washing that awaited me on my return. So I veered off the path, following the burnt smell deeper into the jungle.

Less than forty meters from the path, I saw the Tree. I have thought of it ever since as a proper noun -- it wasn't just a tree like so many others in the jungle. It was the Tree, and it had stood in the jungle for centuries before sending out its signal and drawing me in. The signal, which I first took for a simple odor, turned out to be much more.

The Tree stood no taller than any of the trees around it, but it must have been at least three meters in diameter. Its bark was a patchwork of browns and grays, splotched with dead moss and splattered with bird droppings. The ground around the Tree was slick with those droppings and littered with the bodies of birds. There must have been fifty scattered about, their feathers smoking, perpendicular to their carcasses. Some of them had no feathers at all, just oozing wounds covering their frail bodies. Some of them still twitched.

The bodies would begin to rot, soon. For now, their burnt odor remained masked by the smell of the wood, the smell of the Tree. Tendrils of smoke crawled out a half-dozen knotholes on the face nearest me. I followed their path skyward and saw a larger column of smoke spewing from the Tree's topmost levels. It had been struck by lightning and might have burned from the inside out if not for the rains. Or did it yet burn?

Every day, trees are struck by lightning. I've seen fires before, felt their heat, smelled their smoke. Even then, with so few years behind me, I could identify the type of tree that had been struck by the smell of its smoke from a hundred meters. Which, I soon realized, was one of the reasons I had come to the Tree. While I knew there had been a fire, I did not recognize the smell. It was both too sharp (saying that it burned my nostrils would be stating things too subtly; it stabbed them until they ached) and too sweet. It made me, in a strange way, hungry. It called to me.

The first bird that I stepped on almost brought me back to myself. I remember the feeling of the body crunching beneath my foot, and looking down in dismay. Not because the bird had died (that was something over which I had no control, as it was cooked long before I stepped on it), but because I had just fouled my foot on the creature. I kicked it, and it skittered wetly across the sheen of leaves and white droppings and small rocks that surrounded the Tree.

I would not know for years how lost I became as I walked those few meters to stand in front of the Tree. It is sometimes impossible to recognize oneself as lost until someone manages to find you, after all.

Three of the smoke-oozing knotholes were before me, then -- one at eye level, one a dozen centimeters higher, and one four or five centimeters lower and to the right. I moved my hand past one of the holes; the smoke was warm. The air inside the Tree was warm. There might still be fire, might there not?

It should have occurred to me (and I think that it might have on some distant, indistinct level) that if the tree were to burn from the inside out, I should be as far away from it as possible. Where I stood could be a dangerous place. More than one tree has burned from the inside out, sap boiling until the tree explodes in a burst of wood chips and flame and scalding liquid. Tarasin have died standing much farther from such trees than I now stood.

I say that I think I might have thought of this at the time not because I remember thinking it, but because I remember being afraid. I knew the Tree was something to fear. That, I think, is why I continued standing there. It was a tree, like so many others, but bigger. Stranger. Darker. I dug a finger into one of the knotholes, the smoke pouring over my knuckles. I felt flames lick up my claw and singe my flesh. I couldn't pull away. I twisted my finger and my claw caught something - - a switch - - causing a one-meter section of the Tree to slide back and in. Smoke billowed out, thick and black, and flames licked at the Tree's bark, and I brought my hands up to shield my face.

The Mother of our irstat - - I will not name her, since it was not her fault that I ended up as I did, and she provided me with the best guidance she could - - had worked with me, encouraged me to learn to harness the Force. I was undisciplined. That's not the word she used, of course. She called me "strong-willed," which I now recognize as a back-handed compliment at best. She meant that I didn't listen to her. She meant that I didn't practice as she told me to practice. I always had to do things my own way, on my own time and my own terms. It was only because she sensed a gift for the Force in me that she worked with me at all, I think, in the hopes that I might be able to harness my own ability before it destroyed me. Even under her tutelage, I had begun to walk down a dark path. If she noticed then, she gave no sign.

Five years ago, she died, and if she thought of me at all, she thought of me as one of her failures. I did not learn to harness myself. I chose instead to work to harness the world around me.

There was something about the Tree that had drawn me here, and now there was a door in the Tree, and I very much wanted to go through that door. But through fire? No. At the time, I could no more walk through fire than could anyone else. This was a skill that came much later. What I knew then was how to bring the rains back, to bring the winds, and to put out this fire. It needed to be extinguished. I needed to do it.

I raised my arms and felt the Force, the great web of life in the jungle. I felt the tension in the air that had been lightning, and was now memory. The heavy mist around me, and the puddles around my feet, shivered as I reached out and slid myself inside them. I became the tension. I became the water. I wrapped myself in the memory of the storm and brought it back, all roaring winds and whipping raindrops the size of my scorched claw.

The rain blasted sideways, swirling its way around me and into the doorway in the Tree. I tugged at the wind, twisting it, bending it through the doorway and up, deep inside, carrying the water with it. I closed my eyes and moved with the wind and rain up into the Tree, up stairs carved into wood so ancient that it had forgotten it ever lived, through rooms where Tarasin lay on the floor, all the way to the top of the Tree where the black hole that had

spewed smoke now spewed rain - - my rain - - straight up.

I felt, but did not see, the fire die. Lowering my arms, I let the storm go, let the winds settle and the rain fall back to the ground, and all of the tension again settled to memory.

When I opened my eyes, she stood in the doorway before me. One burned hand gripped the frame of the door, poised to slide a finger into the knothole I'd used to open it. She stared at me through soot-blackened eyes, and I have never in my life been more certain that another living creature wanted to kill me. Tarasin or no, there was an anger in those eyes that went beyond anything I had imagined. Strength, too. I still have not met her equal.

Her voice, a hiss like a recently doused cookfire, made me shiver. "Why are you here?" She flexed the fingers of her right hand, the one that did not hold fast to the doorway, and continued to glare at me.

There was no answer I could give, I thought, that would satisfy her. She would kill me without regard to what I said. I thus determined that, if I were to die, at least I would tell the truth.

I looked up the Tree, with its patchwork bark and its hidden secrets. I felt life, stirring inside it - - the other Tarasin I had seen, waking in the aftermath of the blaze. And I knew, for the first time, the darkness that lay at its heart. It was a place of power. I had to come here, no matter what the price.

"It called me," I said. Then I met her eyes once more and waited for the end.

Instead, she stepped aside. "We will see if it called you. Come inside."

So I entered the Tree, and the door closed behind me. When I emerged two days later, I was of the Wyrd.